

Making what comes out of the faucet safe

More and more people are turning on the tap for their drinking water.

Whether because of heightened environmental consciousness or amplified attention to the pocket-book, public water systems have come under renewed scrutiny.

Ninety percent of the municipal water systems meet or surpass federal drinking-water requirements and produce water that is safe to drink, says Emily Wurth of Food & Water Watch, a Washington-based advocacy group.

That's good news for Northeast Ohioans, most of whom get their water from Lake Erie. The majority of it is processed by the Cleveland Division of Water — which serves 1.5 million people in Northeast Ohio.

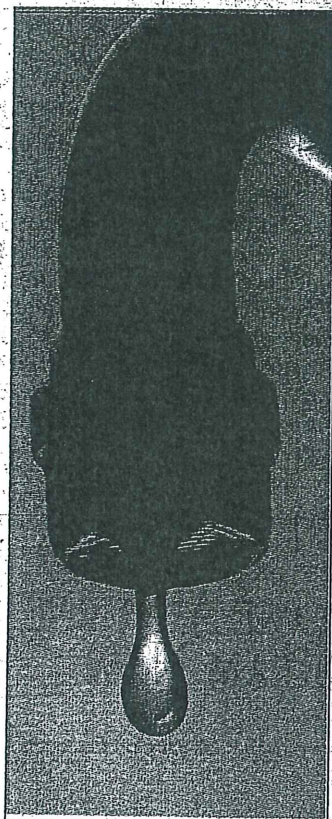
Cleveland's water system, regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency, scored high marks on its most recent water-quality report, which showed negligible amounts of contaminants commonly found in drinking water. (To see the report go to: tinyurl.com/clevwater)

The purifying process starts five miles out on the lake, where the division has its intake pipes.

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SAFE

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"Being out that far, we get a minimum amount of runoff and sewage discharge," says Maggie Rodgers, Cleveland's water-quality manager. "The farther out on the lake we go, the cleaner the water is."

Debris and fish are removed from the water, and chemicals are used for purification: aluminum sulfate to clump the particles together for filtering; chlorine to kill bacteria and viruses; potassium permanganate, an antiseptic used to condition the water; powdered activated carbon to improve taste and eliminate odors; phosphoric acid to control corrosion and keep the lead out of the water; and sodium hydroxide for pH balance.

State law calls for the addition of fluoride, used to prevent tooth decay.

Rodgers says that the water

division conducts 400 tests each day at the treatment plants and various locations in the 640-square-mile area to ensure purity along the distribution routes.

Cleveland supplies water to five counties. Because chlorine dissipates as it travels, the concentration may be less in cities farthest from the distribution plants near Lake Erie.

There are circumstances that the water division cannot control.

Lead can leach into drinking water from pipes on a customer's property and from faucets and shower heads inside the house. Because we cannot see, smell or taste lead, testing in a certified lab (at a cost of \$20 to \$50) is the only way to detect it in water at a home.

Cloudy or discolored water can be from air in or small amounts of sediment from cast-iron pipes. Neither source is not harmful, says Rolf Porter, the Cleveland Division of Water's acting commissioner. Run the water a few minutes, and the cloudiness should pass.

Not everyone likes the taste of what's coming out of the tap, and many people buy bottled water, which is regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Wurth says about half of the U.S. processing plants that bottle water (including some in Northeast Ohio) start with municipal water and put it through additional purification.

Filters on home faucets, says Wurth, are significantly cheaper than buying bottled water and can produce similar results.

Make sure your filter fits your needs, she says, whether it's removing chlorine to improve taste or taking out impurities.

Filters include countertop carafes, faucet mounts or plumb-in devices. Go to: tinyurl.com/choosefilter for more information.

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